

50 firms that made the Earth move; Since Earth Day began in 1970, forward-thinking companies offered sustainable solutions

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Body

It's been 50 years since the first Earth Day in 1970, when 10 million people took to the streets, parks and auditoriums for a national teach-in on the environment. At the time, questions were mounting about the lead fumes puffing out of tailpipes, the Cleveland river soaked in industrial waste that had caught fire the year before, and the thousands of dead, oil-soaked birds that had washed up on the beaches of Santa Barbara in the largest oil spill in American history.

That April, 10 per cent of the U.S. population came together to voice their outrage and "demand a new way forward for the planet." By the end of the year, the Environmental Protection Agency had been founded, ushering in an era of groundbreaking clean-air, water and endangered-species regulation that would reshape corporate U.S. relationship with nature, providing a cornerstone for modern environmental policy.

The business community hasn't always been an ally of the planet, but it would have a significant role to play in the next half century of environmental action - including developing and deploying solutions, on a global scale, to problems they quite often had a hand in creating.

There is a lot to reflect on from the past 50 years. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it's worth remembering we have a pretty good track record of fixing planetary-scale problems when we set our minds to it. Destructive DDT pesticide was banned in 34 countries, leading to the dramatic comeback of bald eagles, peregrine falcons and osprey. We are just two countries away from the global elimination of lead in gasoline. Emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide were capped, eliminating the scourge of acid rain that threatened to blacken our forests and kill our lakes.

Three things have become clear over the past 50 years. One, deadly environmental problems require regulation, often in the form of banning offending pollutants. Two, unlike, say, the Olympics, the cost of tackling environmental problems usually ends up being less than anticipated, as former U.S. treasury secretary Larry Summers once noted, partly because projected costs are inflated by those who have a vested interest in the status quo and unexpected innovations drive down costs. And three, business can innovate and deliver solutions at scale when governments get the regulations right.

So in honour of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, Corporate Knights, Earth Day Canada and Earth Day Initiative launched an open-nomination process to determine which corporate actions have had the biggest effect on improving the state of affairs on our planet.

The final list includes a few companies that reflect the visionary souls of their environmentalist founders, like Patagonia, Body Shop and Interface flooring. There are also some mad-scientist disrupters and brown-to-green corporate chameleons in the bunch. By far the most common is the early mover, those companies that heard the

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bell tolling before the rest of their peers and made a beeline to change their ways - and, collectively, the trajectory of life on Earth.

Some of those early movers were major emitters under the glare of heavy activist campaigning that brokered peace deals with non-profits and regulators. Others were entrepreneurs who saw which way the wind turbines were blowing, or scalers who used their market power to corral large segments of the economy into greener pastures.

Many companies didn't make the cut. DuPont was nominated for breaking ranks with other chemical giants by backing the Montreal Protocol's phaseout of ozone-depleting CFCs (a critical move from a company that had made the chemical in great quantities for decades), but it had spent years aggressively undermining earlier domestic bans in the U.S. GM was the first North American automaker to say it would make cars that run on both unleaded and leaded gasoline, but the car company (which invented leaded gas in 1921) also fought tooth and nail against regulations that would effectively outlaw leaded fuel altogether.

The final Top 50 actions that made the list are examples of moments that reveal the profound impact corporations can have on the planet when they lead change rather than follow it. This list isn't an endorsement of a company's entire corporate legacy. It's a recognition that one act - one sustainability chief's initiative; one big-tent collaboration with non-profits, regulators and like-minded companies; one sustainably minded CEO - can shift the tides.

In reality, a whole cohort of players made each action possible - educators and agitators (i.e., persistent scientists, activists and journalists) as well as implementers and navigators (behind-the-scenes public servants and employees). Combined, their efforts helped clear toxic pollutants, curb gigatons of climate-cooking carbon, conserve landfills of waste, preserve acres of forest and save countless species, giving our grandchildren a fighting chance to call a thriving planet home on Earth Day's 100th anniversary.

In the meantime, the purpose of this year's Earth Day, explains co-founder Denis Hayes, "is to try to create enough pressure on governments and companies around the world to be aggressive in their leadership on (climate action)."

"In my ideal world," Hayes says, "we would look back on 2020 as an inflection point for carbon emissions ... I'd like to see us having designed an economy that can operate with equilibrium."

While the pandemic is the most urgent threat facing us this year, the climate crisis represents the greatest challenge to the future of humanity - and also vast opportunities for those disrupters and scalers that deliver closed-loop, clean-economy solutions. We hope this Green 50 list will inspire more leadership at a time when the planet and every living entity on it needs it most.

Open nominations for the Green 50 were held in February. In addition, Corporate Knights contacted close to 100 thought leaders in various sectors and industries to get their input. A team of expert advisers helped reduce the shortlist to 150, then a panel of judges voted on their top 50 picks.

The full Green 50 will be on [Corporateknights.com](https://www.corporateknights.com) on April 20.

The following judges helped us select the Green 50:

Pierre Lussier, director of Earth Day Canada

John Oppermann, executive director of Earth Day Initiative

Toby Heaps, CEO and co-founder of Corporate Knights

Adria Vasil, managing editor, Corporate Knights

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